



UNSAFE VS UNCOMFORTABLE: WHAT CAN I TOLERATE?

PREP FOR THE SESSION

At-a-Glance:

This resource aims to help learners distinguish between ideas that are unsafe and ideas that create discomfort so they can explore the range of opinions they can engage with. Learners will be introduced to a framework by Yehuda Kurtzer and Mijal Bitton at the Shalom Hartman Institute and draw from the metaphor of a sukkah to engage with the tension between vulnerability and protection. Finally, learners will dive deeper into what underlies their comforts and discomforts through a chevruta activity.

Resource Objective

Through exploring the value of vulnerability, particularly in contrast with protection, learners will develop new insights that support their ability to access the boundaries of perspectives and opinions they can engage with and potentially experiment with expanding these boundaries.



Time Estimate:

60 minutes



Best Uses:

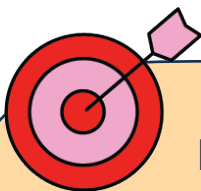
- Teens and Young Adults
- Ideally a group that has built up trust with one another



Material & Setup:

- Butcher paper
- Marker for note taking
- Dot stickers in 3 colors, preferably red, yellow and green. Markers of those colors will work as well.
- Hang around the room the headlines that you will read aloud during Frame the Issue.

LET'S GET STARTED



FRAME THE ISSUE

Many of us are bombarded by opinions, flyers, and headlines about political issues. Even when we try to avoid them! I am going to share a few headlines that I have seen recently.

Facilitator note: The sample headlines below can be adjusted. They are meant to provoke the people in the room in a gentle, uncomfortable way but should not be activating or violent (i.e. no mention of sexual assault). You may want to adjust the examples below given the learners you work with. After you read each headline, pause and share the reflection prompts below.

Sample headlines:

1. Jews have no legitimate claim to the land of modern-day Israel. A two-state solution is already a major concession made by the Palestinians.
2. Gaza should be emptied of Palestinians and Israel should resettle the territory.
3. Rabbis call for the US to stop transfer of weapons to Israel.
4. Peace is impossible until Palestinian refugees let go of their demand to "return" to Israel.
5. The Bible says Israel belongs to the Jews – and has for 3,000 years.

Facilitator prompts learners to reflect privately after each headline:

- How do you feel after hearing that headline?
- Notice your breathing and your heart rate.
- How do your muscles feel? When do they tense? When do they feel relaxed?
- What words come to your mind? What images?

After reading all headlines, facilitator prompts a full group conversation:

- So what did we just experience?
- How are you feeling after hearing all of those headlines, as opposed to just one?
- Which headlines felt hardest - or maybe even intolerable - to hear? How could you tell?

15 min





On the [Identity/Crisis podcast](#), Yehuda Kurtzer created a framework that can help us think through these and other statements about the war in Israel.



***Scan the QR code to listen to the
“Identity/Crisis podcast” by Yehuda Kurtze***

He said: “[There are] those [ideas] that make us unsafe and those that make us uncomfortable. And then within the category of the uncomfortable, those that make us unproductively uncomfortable and those types of incidents that produce productive discomfort.”

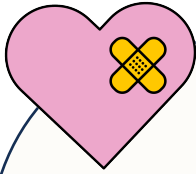
He goes on to say that unsafe and productive discomfort have distinctions: The former has a clear negative outcome. This might be mental health challenges or physical violence. The latter has a clear positive outcome which may include engaging in calm conversations around ideas you do not agree with, but seeing a validity in a new perspective, or the ability to condemn something yet contextualize it as non-threatening.



Facilitator prompts the group:

- What are some examples of productive discomfort that you have experienced in your life? How did you know it was productive versus unsafe?

30 min



EXPLORE THE VALUE: VULNERABILITY

When we open ourselves up to uncomfortable ideas, it can feel vulnerable - like we are exposing ourselves to harm. Yet, think about when you started a new type of exercise or physical activity. The first few times you did it, it likely felt difficult. You may have been sore, and maybe you thought, "I am no good at this, I should give up!" After some practice, it may have started to feel easier. We get stronger and more flexible with practice.

We inherently have to let down some walls of protection and push ourselves in order to benefit from the growth that comes from vulnerability. Researcher and storyteller, Brené Brown says "vulnerability is the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. It is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity."

And yet, we all have our edge points - the boundary where the productive discomfort becomes unproductive or even unsafe, where we open ourselves to physical injury or emotional harm.



JEWISH WISDOM

The main practice of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, which is celebrated in the fall and connected to the agricultural harvest season, is to build a sukkah. A sukkah is a temporary shelter meant to remind us of the temporary dwellings the Israelites built when they were wandering through the desert and evokes the vulnerability of being a "wandering" people.

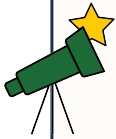
Here are some of the requirements for the structure:

- A sukkah must be built under the open sky, not below a tree or other object.
- The walls of the sukkah can be made of any material, but have to be sturdy enough to withstand ordinary wind and regular weather.
- A sukkah cannot be taller than 20 cubits regardless of the other dimensions (a cubit is about the length from your elbow to the tip of your middle finger).
- Enough *s'chah* (roof covering) should be placed upon the sukkah so there is more shade than sunlight.
- But the *s'chah* should also be light enough so that large stars can be seen through at night.
- It is customary to eat every meal in the sukkah on Sukkot, even if it is slightly uncomfortable. However, if there is extreme weather, enough to cause severe discomfort or harm, it is acceptable to go inside of a house.



Facilitator prompts the group:

- What elements described here offer protection, and what makes the dweller of the sukkah vulnerable?
- What do you think of the balance of vulnerability and protection? Did the sages get it right? Why/why not?
- Let us use the sukkah as a metaphor for how we show up in conversations where we disagree. Why, if at all, might it be important to balance vulnerability with protection? What would that look like in practice?



ACTIVITY

We are now going to dive head first into exploring our own needs around protection and comforts around vulnerability in the context of Israel. Our shared goal is to push boundaries in a healthy way, which means being honest if something goes too far. A reminder that nothing we say or do in this room impacts the situation in Israel but it does impact our dynamic as a community.

We are going to brainstorm a list of statements/ideas you have heard about Israel and the ongoing conflict. We are not making a list of what we agree with versus disagree with. Or what we think is absurd versus absolute truth. We want to generate a list of everything you have heard.

Facilitator note: Think about our opening exercise. You want to create productive discomfort. In generating at least 10 statements from different perspectives, you may need to push your group if you notice homogeneity around ideas.

Some ideas that you may want to consider including:

- Using the word genocide or not doesn't matter. Israel is clearly killing massive numbers of Palestinians.
- The destruction of Gaza is simply a byproduct of a justified war.
- The United States should withhold aid from the Palestinians until the hostages are freed.
- The United States should withhold military aid from Israel until there is a ceasefire.
- Palestinians have a historic connection and right to live on any land between the (Jordan) river and the (Mediterranean) sea.
- Israelis/Jews have a historic connection and right to live on any land between the (Jordan) river and the (Mediterranean) sea.
- North American Jews should not have a say in Israeli politics and society.
- North American Jews are essential voices in Israeli politics and society.

Facilitator note: leave a bit of room after each bullet point. Learners will need to put stickers next to some of them in the next step of this activity.



Now that we have brainstormed this list, I want you to think about how these statements make you feel. I am going to ask you to put a green sticker or dot next to ideas that you feel like you can hear—not necessarily what you agree with. Red stickers or dots should go next to those ideas that you feel like you cannot tolerate. They make you feel unsafe. And finally the yellow stickers or dots are for those about which you are not sure.

After learners have placed their stickers or dots, facilitator prompts group:

Let's look at our dots together. Where do you see trends or outliers in terms of what we found tolerable, intolerable, or unsure about? What do you find surprising or interesting about the results?

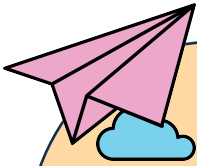
Now we are going to break up into pairs or trios. Each group will pick one or two statements that at least one partner marked as yellow to do a deeper dive. Our goal here is to be vulnerable and open, allowing emotions to emerge rather than suppressing them.

Facilitator note: You can divide the group randomly or can ask people to raise their hand about ideas for which they put a yellow dot and match them up. The latter requires more vulnerability. Think if your group is ready/able to handle that.

Prompt partners to discuss:

- What is really at the heart of what makes me uncomfortable about this statement? This may be related to the meaning or implications of words (genocide, apartheid, occupation), what the opinion stands in contradiction to (is this a binary opinion or one that leaves open a plurality of ideas?), the context in which it is shared, (who is saying it, when) or even the idea itself.
- When, if ever, can I see a way or a context in which I can be more vulnerable and sit with this idea even if I disagree with it? When might I need to protect myself from this idea?
- What is guiding me? Feelings, logic, both, something else?

10 min



REFLECT AND PROMPT ACTION

Facilitator prompts the group:

- What from the last activity stood out to you or surprised you?
- Let's revisit our opening activity. How, if at all, does processing a statement with a peer or trusted partner feel different than when we read it without context or time to process it?
- What did you learn about when you need protection from an idea and when you can uncomfortably sit with the idea?

Optional Closing Question: *What can you do the next time you encounter an idea that is a yellow dot?*

Optional Closing Activity: *Now that you have had time to process with a partner, you may have a better sense of how you can hear different opinions. Draw a sukkah that helps explain the protections you need and the vulnerabilities you are willing to show. If you need a framework (pun intended) think of the protections as your sukkah walls. They are meant to stay up the entire week and serve as the boundaries of our hut. The roof or s'chah can be the vulnerabilities. We expect over the week of sukkot that some of these will wither or fall along with the elements of nature.*